



## RESEARCH PROGRESS/ *NOTA PENYELIDIKAN*

### Small Cities Livability: Transition Towards Sustainability

SHAHARUDIN IDRUS, ABDUL SAMAD HADI & ABDUL HADI HARMAN SHAH

#### INTRODUCTION

Small cities in Malaysia have played different roles since the British time and before. They have provided the link between primarily agricultural kampung (village) hinterland and the rest of the world. Particularly the larger urban hubs of the country. However, these places are more than just another rung in the hierarchy. They have their own uniqueness that contributes not only to their own character but also the character of the country. Especially the character of the people that progress along with the country. They provided a platform for urbanization as well a glimpse at modernisation.

Towns in Malaysia used to be only service centres and collection points for plantations and tin mines. They were developed purely for economic reasons but as is the case for all towns and cities the world over, these towns grew to be cultural hubs that went beyond any expectations of the original developers. If one remembers that the term 'urb' from which the word 'urban' is derived, meant a piece of curved wood that represents an altar, or a place of worship, one would realise that the meanings taken by the word urban encompassed even entire civilisations, civility and progress.

While the civilizations of the world are continuously influenced by large cities, it is in small towns that the process of urbanization is most clear. At the in-between place of the rural and the urban, these small cities provide the clearest pictures of urbanization.

The questions of small towns and their contributions to the socio-economic development were hotly debated recently while the focus on metropolitan areas has been positions itself to be globally listed in the urban global. For the past thirty years, the small towns in this region were as sleepy hollows, providing local goods and services to their small populations and their respective hinterlands. Some of the small towns performed as administrative, educational and marketing functions appropriate only to their level position in the traditional Malaysian urban hierarchy.

#### Nilai, Kajang and Banting

Three small cities, Nilai, Banting and Kajang are the focus of discussion in this article. These three towns illustrate the general process towards urban sustainability. Nilai town represents a town that receives directly foreign direct investment (FDI) to generate industries; Banting representing a tourism center but with new industrial areas close by; and Kajang representing the old district administrative center but close to industrial estate in Bangi new town.

The cities studied are within the surrounds of Langat Basin, situated south and adjacent to the Klang Valley. Klang Valley is Malaysia's highly developed urban conurbation, where the nation's capital Kuala Lumpur is located. It has an area of about 2,940 km<sup>2</sup> and population growth has been steady from about 411,768 in 1981 to 719,567 in 1991 (Department of Statistic, 1995) and 849,082 in 1995. In 1998 the population of the entire Basin has been estimated to be at 962,649 and in the year 2000 the population of the Basin is expected to rise to 1,349,775 (Department of Statistics, 2001). By the year 2020, the population in this basin has been estimated to be at 1,679,669 and 2050 is about 2,424,977 (Economic Planning Unit 2000). These numbers all indicating rapid growth in the region.

Being contiguous to the Klang Valley and Kuala Lumpur, from which development activities spill over, the Langat Basin is naturally the main choice of many people to locate their development projects in the 1970s and 1980s. With an earlier history of improved accessibility, development activities have moved into the basin in the last thirty years or so. This set to transform the plantation area into urbanized landscape, sprawling from the edge of existing urban centers far into agricultural areas.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Langat Basin saw changes to its land use patterns, clearing forests to make way for extensive rubber plantations and rubber small- holdings, and later in the 1960-s from rubber to oil palm. Since the late 1970-s the Langat Basin saw further conversion of agricultural areas to urban areas at a faster rate in some localities.



Physically, the Basin comprises a watershed catchment area to the northeast along the ridge of Banjaran Titiwangsa (Main Range) of Peninsular Malaysia and a coastal fringe along the Straits of Malacca to the southwest. Being adjacent to Kuala Lumpur, the Basin has seen rapid expansion in areas developed for housing, industrial estates and business centres over the last decade (Nordin and Azrina 1998; Mazlin et. al 2002; Mazlin et. al 2004). This has largely been in response to the needs for urban housing as well as industrial, business and commercial property development in the Langat Basin.

### **The Role of Small Towns in National Development**

The commonly stated spatial aims of regional planning policies assume that small and intermediate urban centres contribute to regional and rural development in four main ways:

- As centres of demand/markets for agricultural produce from the rural region, either for local consumers or as links to national and export markets. Access to markets is a prerequisite to increase rural agricultural incomes, and the proximity of local small and intermediate centres to production areas is assumed to be a key factor.
- As centres for the production and distribution of goods and services to their rural region. Such concentration is assumed to reduce costs and improve access to a variety of services, both public and private and for both rural households and enterprises. Hence, services include agricultural extension, health and education (and access to other government services), as well as banking, post, services of professionals such as lawyers and accountants and lower order services such as bars and restaurants, and wholesale and retail sales of manufactured goods from within and outside the region.
- As centres for the growth and consolidation of rural non-farm activities and employment, through the development of small and medium-sized enterprises or through the relocation of branches of large private or parastatal enterprises.
- As an attraction to rural migrants from the surrounding region through demand for nonfarm labour, and thereby decreasing pressure on larger urban centres.

### **METHOD OF STUDY**

The study uses extended observation to view the current situation of three small towns, augmented by secondary data obtained from various agencies such as Department of Environment (DoE), local government (Majlis Perbandaran Kajang, Majlis Perbandaran Nilai and Majlis Daerah Kuala Langat). Repeated structured visits to the study areas allow the researchers to form basic opinions on the state of these small towns.

### **SUSTAINABILITY OF SMALL TOWNS**

The common definition of small towns is based on their population (Table 1). In that sense even large metropolitans began as small towns. It is a start in identifying small towns, but inadequate to explain a comprehensive small town phenomena. The phenomena consist of a population threshold, a way of life and economic linkages. These demographic, socio-cultural and economic aspects of a town determine its sustainability as a small town. A small town can explode to be a city, or a large town; or it can be reduced to be bypassed places, relegated to very localised functions of serving the immediate surroundings, original functions from the pre-independence era. Table 2 presents the traditional urban hierarchy as stated by function. It is argued that, hierarchies are a less meaningfully urban structure today than it was during the early years after independence. Today many of the smaller cities, as to be argued later, form their own networks, linked to systems not hierarchical in nature.

Table 1: Malaysian Urban Hierarchy by Population

Population	Urban Centres	
	1991	2000
Above 1,000,000	1	1
500,000 – 999,999	0	3
150,000 – 499,999	22	34
75,000 – 149,999	26	36
25,000 – 74,999	79	63
10,000 – 24,999	24	11

Table 2: Urban Hierarchy by Function

Population	Urban Centres	
	1991	2000
Cities (population more than 300,00)	5	18
Town Population between 1000,000 to 299,999	34	44
Pekan Population between 10,000 to 99,999)	113	86

### Urban Population Growth in the Study Area

The growth of the urban populations in Langat Basin can be divided into three phases. Phase I (1891 – 1957), Phase II (1970 – 1980) and Phase III (1991 – 2000). Data-wise, Phase I, the pre-independence period was sketchy. Data from the first census conducted in Malaya estimated the population of Kajang/Sg Chua town to be about 1,500 people. In 1911, a few other places especially Mantin, Semenyih, Sepang and Cheras Batu 9 were developed at a small scale. In 1921 and 1931 population increase reached above 1,000 people for Semenyih and Mantin. At the same time Kajang/Sg Chua keep increasing their population and in 1947 Kajang/Sg Chua has a population of over 10,000 people. The census in 1957, when Malaya achieves Independence from Britain, recorded the Kajang/Sg Chua town to have reached 14,866 people. Meanwhile other places also showed increase in population.

During Phase II, urban population in Kajang/Sg Chua was about 21,950. About five areas achieved population of more than 5,000 people. The areas were Semenyih, Jenjarom, Mantin, Banting and Kajang/Sg Chua. In 1980, the number with a population above 5,000 remained but the population of the entire Langat Basin increased. In 1980 the Bangi new town area emerged and the population was estimated at about 1,500 people when Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was transferred from Kuala Lumpur in the late 1979. Phase III also showed an increase in the number of areas with a population of more than 10,000. There were six such places which increased to eight in 2000. That was also the year when Putrajaya dan Cyberjaya were developed with a population

about 7,223 and 2,839 respectively. Putrajaya as a new federal government administrative center and Cyberjaya as a new information technology-based small city.

### TRANSITION TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF SMALL CITIES

The study identified several features within the urban landscape that indicate the towns' attempts at sustainability. While no structured temporal study was done at this time, the researchers use their background experiences with the history of the towns, reinforced with published information about the towns to identify these attempts at changes. This article focuses on three areas of change in these towns; urban landuse, regional networks and functions, and community stability.

### Urban Landuse Change

The study identified urban landuse mix in all three towns to be changing. The trademark of the small town is the general store – the kedai runcit. While these stores have decreased, they remain part of the landscape complementing more specialised single function shops as well as various hyper and supermarkets. The study noted that the diversity of commercial landuses seem to be less in the new planned cities of Nilai as opposed to the more organically evolved towns of Banting or Kajang, albeit the new town of Nilai shows much higher specializations than the other two. This tendency towards diversity is argued to be part of the sustainability strategy of the cities, (Table 3).

Table 3: The Urban Landuse Diversity Index

Small City	Urban landuse Diversity Index*
Nilai New Town	0.97
Nilai Old Town	2.925
Kajang	3.544
Banting	6.559

\*The Urban Landuse Diversity Index is based on Shannon-Weaver Biodiversity Index

### Linking to Regional Networks

Another requirement for the sustainability of small cities is its continued ability to link itself to the region and beyond. Previously these small cities only cater for the surrounding communities. In the age of globalization, the function of these cities have increased to include the global, catering for post-structural, post fordist-industries that bypassed previously set hierarchies. Each of the three cities have developed networks of their own. Nilai is linked to the global hubs of KLIA and Putrajaya while Banting is connected to the waterport of Klang. Kajang has its own network, an in between place linked to Kuala Lumpur and the twin city of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya. Kajang's network has been established much longer than any of the other cities studied.

### Community Stability and Identity

Another trademark of small cities is its stable communities. Small cities often foster the development of stable communities with families intending to continue bringing up their children in an environment that they can be a part of. The old town of Nilai, Banting and Kajang all have established communities that are part of the city's identity while the Nilai New Town seem to portray a more transient look.

### CONCLUSION

There is currently a flux in the changing landscape of small cities. Different elements of the urban invaded these towns at a pace unheard of a decade ago, and many of these smaller cities are not ready for such rapid changes. Increased housing without adequate accompanying infrastructures, physical, economy and social has created partial living. Some commute long distances to work, others have to venture far for services, and the flux brought in a high level of transients. Such a situation, if prolonged, will contribute to the unsustainability of the urbanization process. Too much stress on the land with little linkage outlets will result in turmoil. It will be made worse if the main economic engine stalled. Development projects halted would cause, not only displacement and the disappearance of various market, it will scar the landscape with abandoned projects partially built. The pacing of development is as important as the development itself and the sustainability of small cities is dependent on a controlled rate of change.

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- Shaharudin Idrus  
Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI)  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)  
43600 UKM, Bangi  
dinn6358@gmail.com
- Emeritus Professor Dato' Dr. Abdul Samad Hadi  
Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI)  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)  
43600 UKM, Bangi  
asamad@ukm.my
- Associate Profesor Abdul Hadi Harman Shah  
School of Social, Development and Environment  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)  
43600 UKM, Bangi  
aharmans@gmail.com